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CHINA: DEVELOPMENT MODELS AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

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Contents

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Banning Logging, Conserving Legitimacy:
Large-Scale Ecological Restoration under Xi Jinping

Abstract *"Organizational ideology" (Schurmann 1968) continues to be constitutive in contemporary Chinese politics. The issue of the urgency of coherence between values and action shapes decision-making and how the leadership conveys its decisions to the public. The case study of the recent logging ban in natural forests shows that the policy sends symbolic messages of political will and regime capacity to reconcile conflicting interests of development. The official propaganda turns it into a signature policy of Xi Jinping while constructing the path-dependency of party-rule and attempts to substantiate future projections with empirical data from the past. Nevertheless, the policy is contested among experts and also bears political risks.*

Keywords *China, legitimacy, forestry, logging ban, Xi Jinping*

1. Introduction

In March 2014, the Chinese government announced its plans to impose a ban on commercial logging in China's natural forests. After two years of trials in Northeastern state-owned forests, the provision was rolled out nationally in 2017. The ban, technically an extension of the Natural Forest Protection Program (NFPP) that had been initiated in 1998, forces state-owned forest enterprises to shift their focus from timber harvest to forest management and develop alternative industries to create income opportunities for laid-off workers and forest-dependent communities. It is expected to give almost 60 percent of China's forests the possibility to

recover from over-logging and help restore their ecological functions and resistance (Sun et al. 2016: 1). By launching the policy in Heilongjiang, the central government, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, sent a strong symbolic message, as Heilongjiang's Longjiang Forestry Company used to be the historical powerhouse of China's forest sector. Chinese (state) media heralded the policy as being groundbreaking due to its expected environmental impacts (Han 2014).

However, the policy is not uncontested. Many forest experts in China and abroad do not regard the ban to be an "optimum solution" (Yang 2017: 113) and, informally, profess that the policy is doomed to fail, due to the resistance of local governments and the limited reach of state authority into the collective forests. Some even predict that, if the ban holds, the government risks causing more harm than good, as aging forests might create severe environmental problems in the future, such as increased risk of forest fires (Fieldwork conversations August 2019). Private small and medium-sized forest enterprises that have so far relied on domestic timber resources have to enhance their global competitiveness and find extraction bases abroad (Sun et al. 2016; Yang 2017; Ke 2018). International observers concerned with transnational flows of commodities worry that decreased domestic timber supply will cause harm to the environments of those countries that serve as extraction bases for China (Laurence 2011; Sun et al. 2016; Viña et al. 2016; Liu 2018; Long 2018; Macqueen 2018; Ong/Carver 2019).

Ever since the early 2000s, the question of how to substantially improve both economic and environmental outcomes has become a vital issue in the public and political discourse in China. The implementation and outcomes of such policies are now critical performance standards against which local governments are being evaluated – not only by higher state-levels, but also by the broader public. Thus, the operationalisation of the normative goal of sustainable development has emerged as a critical factor for regime legitimacy in contemporary China. Conducting a context-sensitive reading of Chinese government documents and state media publications, I address two research questions in this article. Firstly, what is the relevance of the policy in the current leadership's legitimation strategy? Secondly, given the controversy about the policy, how does the government convey the policy to the public in such a way as to make it conducive to regime legitimacy?

In order to answer my research questions, I draw on the notion of "organizational ideology" (Schurmann 1968: 19) and theories of symbolic legitimation (Holbig 2018; Wang 2018). Regime legitimacy in China is grounded on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) capacity to turn propagated values into coherent action that responds to the current challenges of development. However, performance is not tangible but experienced through "schemata of interpretation" (Holbig 2018: 360). Also, most citizens base their judgment of their leaders' performance on symbols rather than facts (Wang 2018) that they "hear, read, or see through media" (Van Zuydam/Metze 2016: 62). I argue that organisational ideology continues to shape political decision-making and the way in which regime performance is conveyed via public channels. With this article, I aim to contribute to debates about political ecology and regime legitimation in China, with a particular focus on the era of Xi Jinping.

In the remainder of this article, I introduce the theoretical framework and then present the findings of my analysis. I close with a discussion of the anticipated outcomes of the policy and concluding remarks about its impacts on regime legitimacy.

2. Legitimacy, ideology, and storytelling

David Beetham (1991: 16) claims that power is legitimate when the rulers conform to established rules, the rules are based on shared beliefs, and there is evidence that the subordinates consent to the power relations. While in democratic countries, political parties compete with their visions and values for popular votes, in the Chinese party-state, the CCP does not allow any rival ideology to emerge in the political system. Despite not standing for elections, the CCP is as much dependent on popular support as governments and political parties in democratic countries. To maintain legitimacy, the CCP has to actively justify its claim and seek the consent of the Chinese people.

Zhu Yuchao (2011: 124f.) finds that the Chinese party-state has shifted from a "mobilization mode of legitimacy" to a "performance-based legitimacy". While legitimacy originally came from the popular support of the Chinese revolution and ideology, the leadership was compelled to shift

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the sources of its legitimacy to the provision of economic growth, social stability, national unity, and institutional reform after the Cultural Revolution (Zhu 2011: 130). Despite the paradigmatic shift described by Zhu, recent research acknowledges that ideology remains constitutive to political processes in contemporary China and regime legitimation (Noesselt 2017; Holbig 2018; Marinelli 2018).

In his seminal book *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, Franz Schurmann (1968: 19) defines ideology as "a systematic set of ideas which is used to create its own organization and to achieve its goals". Focusing his analysis on the CCP's "organizational ideology" (1968: 19), Schurmann distinguishes between two dimensions: pure ideology communicates values and conceptions, whereas practical ideology sets norms and rules that "prescribe behavior and thus are expected to have direct action consequences" (Schurmann 1968: 38f.). The ideas of practical ideology, so he explains, would have no legitimacy without pure ideology; at the same time, the party could not transform its *Weltanschauung* into consistent action without relying on practical ideology (Schurmann 1968: 23). Put in other words, consistency between values and action is key to the legitimacy of one-party rule in China.

Consequently, the CCP must convince the broader public that it can turn the general and abstract labels of ideology into correspondent concrete political action. However, performance is not entirely tangible but rather a socially constructed reality: public perceptions of performance are experienced through "schemata of interpretations" (Holbig 2018: 360), such as statistics, government reports, and news reports, and build on political symbols that reassure the people of the functioning of the state (Edelman in Wang 2018: 711). Symbolic legitimation is, therefore, an act of political communication.

Today, politicians operate in environments in which citizens base their judgment of their leaders' performance on "what they hear, read, or see through media" (Van Zuydam/Metze 2016: 62). Hence, governments seek public support via a series of public channels, such as newspapers, television, websites, and social media, where they strategically frame issues. Yet political communication is not only about the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality […for making] them more salient in a communicating context" (Entman 1993: 52); it is, rather, about telling stories. Since "narra-

tives help people understand and communicate information by organizing information in a way that is conducive to human cognition" (Johnes/ Peterson 2017), "the story is part of the success" (Fagin in Buonocuore 2019) of any (political) issue in a media-driven political environment. The difference between China and other political contexts is how the story is told, so as to become a compelling narrative that can support regime legitimacy.

I argue that organizational ideology, as described by Schurmann (1968), continues to be constitutive in today's politics in China. The issue of the urgency of coherence between values and actions not only shapes political decision-making but also how the leadership conveys these decisions to the public. Based on this theoretical framework, I explain, in the following sections, how the logging ban relates to Xi Jinping's political agenda and strategy of regime legitimation, and demonstrate how the principles of organizational ideology shape the construction of its performance narrative.

3. Sustainability as a political project: ideological and governance reform

Over the past two decades, observers have witnessed the Chinese central government's efforts to gradually shift its economic growth-driven model of development to a model that aims at the reconciliation of economic, social, and environmental interests. A driving factor behind this transformation has been the conceptualisation of an ideology of sustainability sparked by challenges in socio-economic development. At the turn of the century, it became an irrefutable fact that China's one-sided development model had brought prosperity only for a few, while it had left behind a significant share of China's population and put a damaging toll on the country's natural resources and environment. Being confronted with yawning regional disparities, social inequalities, and aggravating environmental concerns (Zheng/Tok 2007: 6f.), the leadership started to promote an ideological reform that drew on these undesired developments and aimed to overcome them. Since then, central leaders and party ideologues have been conceptualising a Chinese ideology of sustainability constituted by several new key ideological constructs.

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Beginning with their tenure in 2002, Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao endorsed two new ideological guidelines that testified to their political intention to tackle the detrimental effects China's previous development model had brought about. Scientific Development Outlook and Harmonious Socialist Society promised the adoption of a more comprehensive approach of development that would not pursue economic growth at the expense of social equity and environmental soundness anymore (Fewsmith 2004; Holbig 2005). Yet, while at the ideational level, the leadership officially recognised these problems as well as the need for change, efforts in the operational realm did not match with the officially promoted values.

The Hu-Wen administration decentralised the structures of governance and opened governance processes to new actors, particularly NGOs (Mol/Carter 2006), but the environment kept on deteriorating (Ran 2017). Arguably, the outcomes of policies varied across regions and policy fields and were determined by a complex interaction of "intervening variables" (Heberer/Schubert 2012). However, the drawbacks revealed the party-state's incapacity to reconcile economic and environmental interests in the operational realm. Consequently, citizens increasingly voiced their frustrations and dissatisfaction with their government's (environmental) performance (Landesa 2012; Forbes 2014; Yang/Deng 2014). Although recent studies question the exact number of protests and their effective impact on social stability (Whyte 2012; Göbel 2019), the central government undoubtedly remains deeply concerned about social unrest and its potential consequences for political stability and, therefore, also about the political risks of a perceived dissonance between values and action.

When the fifth leadership generation rose to power in late 2012, it was well aware that it had to tackle environmental degradation and solve the clash between economic and environmental interests. At the 18th Party Congress and in the aftermath, China's new leaders made observers take notice of their strong rhetoric that placed great emphasis on the issue of safeguarding China's natural resources and environment. Statements and slogans, such as Li Keqiang's notorious "war on pollution" (Yu 2014), were of unprecedented vigour and conveyed a sense of urgency. On a more conceptual level, Xi Jinping started promoting his signature ideology of the Chinese Dream, a metanarrative that embodies his ambition to achieving "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xinhua 2017). The metan-

arrative attaches importance to the concepts of Ecological Civilization and Beautiful China – both referring to a strategy and vision of sustainable development – and so stresses the relevance of environmental protection for national construction (Ran 2017: 648f.). In parallel, the quest for a better environment resonates in the construct of New Normal, another of Xi's key concepts that not only warranted economic slowdown (Noesselt 2017; Holbig 2018), but also prepared the country and cadres for changing political priorities and performance standards by which local governments would be measured henceforth (China Daily 2013).

In addition to further strengthening the position of environmental protection as a central value in CCP ideology, the central government also set out to reform environmental governance. Key to these efforts has been the centralisation of regulatory and control mechanisms in a host of environmental fields (Kostka/Nahm 2017; van Rooij et al. 2017; Kostka/Zhang 2018; Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2018). By doing so, the leadership hopes to break China's fragmented governance structure and cope with local implementation gaps that characterised the Hu-Wen administration (Kostka/Nahm 2017). At the same time, reforming governance structures is a means to demonstrate responsiveness and political resolve to the wider public. It is, therefore, a feature of symbolic legitimation.

4. Operationalising sustainable development

4.1 Protecting forests: implementation management

Forests are a multifunctional natural resource, as they are an essential source of income generation for many people and deliver a series of ecological services. Conflicts of interests emerge in three areas: the improvement of livelihoods in rural areas, the rehabilitation and conservation of environmental services, and the increase of economic output of those sectors that are dependent on timber production (Robbins/Harrell 2014). While the economic function of forests has always been of vital interest to the Chinese state and a core concern of its rulers (Elvin 2008), their management is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The protection of natural forests in the People's Republic of China (PRC) looks back on a history of "twists and turns in the political and economic decisions of the leadership" (Demurgér et al. 2005: 2). It gath-

ered real pace at the end of the 1990s when the government launched five large-scale ecological restorations and protection programmes after a series of natural calamities, which had caused substantial human losses and economic damages in 1997 and 1998 (Yeh 2009: 886; Liang/Mol 2013: 65-66). The National Forest Protection Program (NFPP) was initially designed to last for 10 years (2000-2010) but was later extended for another 10 (2011-2020). The total investment of Phase I amounted to 111.9 billion RMB[1], plus 18 billion RMB during the first two years of trial implementation (1998-2000) (Yang 2017: 113f.).

In Phase II, the central government doubled its investments to reach 219.5 billion RMB, and an additional 24.5 billion RMB was provided by provincial governments (Yang 2017: 116). Phase II enlarged the area under protection, including 11 new counties around the Danjiangkuo Reservoir of Hubei and Henan (Yang 2017: 116). According to official projections, 35,000 forest protection stations will be established, the total forests within the NFPP will increase by 5.2 million ha, the growing stock by 1.1 billion m³, and carbon storage by 416 million tons; the total area of forests under the NFPP will increase by 15 million ha and forest tending by 17.6 million ha (Shi et al. 2016: 2; Yang 2017: 116). By the year 2020, the programme will create 648,500 jobs (Ke 2018).

Phase II was well into its implementation when the former State Forestry Administration (SFA) and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) announced a halt of commercial logging in natural forests on 1 April, 2014. The central government rolled out the policy in a three-steps-scheme: during the first year, it was trialed in state-owned forests in Heilongjiang that are managed by two of China's most prominent and influential state-owned logging enterprises, Longjiang Forest Industry and Greater Daxing Anling Forestry Company (Zhang 2014). Together they own 18.45 million hectares of forests, accounting for almost 40 percent of the entire province's forests (Liu 2014). Following this, experimentation was extended to forest farms in Heilongjiang, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, and Hebei (SFA 2016). In March 2017, the policy was finally rolled out nationally, including also natural forests managed by collectives and individual households (Zhao 2014; Xiao 2017).

To ensure smooth implementation, the Chinese government draws on a set of familiar regulatory and control measures: the adaptation of the responsibility and performance evaluation system (Zhao 2014); the moni-

toring of the protection of forests under a cooperation-scheme of low-level government authorities and forest organisations; the use of three S technologies (GIP, GS, and GPS) and other new information and communication technologies (Yu 2017); and the establishment of a contract management responsibility system between forest farms and worker families that regulate the access to non-timber forest products (Liu/Xu 2019). Finally, the central government guarantees the provision of significant financial assistance for strengthening local administrative capacities, earmarking some 2.35 billion RMB per year (until 2020) for the support of local forestry authorities to cover forest workers' living expenses (Liu 2014; Sun et al. 2016).

By initiating experimentation in key state-owned forests in Heilongjiang and tackling reforms in the state-owned forest sector first, the leadership sent a strong symbolic message. Heilongjiang and its two forest enterprises used to play a critical role in China's forest industry and national development, as they had provided half of the domestic timber supply between the 1950s and 1980 (Liu/Xu 2019: 46). Before the year 2013/14, reforms in the forest sector had predominantly focused on collectively and individually managed forests, whereas state-owned forest enterprises had remained virtually untouched by the political efforts to foster sustainable forest management practices (Liu 2014). However, in recent years, centrally managed state-owned enterprises have come under growing criticism for their appalling ecological footprint, a problem that Sarah Eaton and Genia Kostka explain in terms of "central protectionism" (2017). Timber harvest had also been decreasing in state-owned forests before the ban due to incessant over-exploitation (Sun et al. 2016: 1; SFA 2018).

By shifting its focus on the state-owned forest sector, the leadership signals its will to tackle overdue reforms in the management of state assets. Also, the perception of controllability is not an irrelevant factor. While reforms in collective forests proved to be much more complex, and outcomes varied across regions and even villages (Dermurgér et al. 2005; Cao 2008; Zhai et al. 2014; Xie et al. 2016), early reforms of state-owned forest farms were comparatively successful (Zhang 2010: 13). Hence, the institutional conditions and earlier successes in this sector may positively affect public perceptions of regime performance under the current leadership.

4.2 Protecting forests: storytelling

As the CCP's ideology is an organisational ideology, official narratives associate policies with their originators and the core ideas of their originators. To underscore the critical role of Xi Jinping, state and media publications depict the General Party Secretary as the originator of the thrust to enforce a logging ban in all of China's natural forests. According to these accounts, Xi announced the plan to ban commercial logging in natural forests at the 5th meeting of the financial and economic central leading group in March 2014 as follows:

> "Since the end of the 1990s, we have been implementing the NFPP at the upper streams of the Yangtze River, the lower and middle streams of the Yellow River, as well as in the Northeast and Inner Mongolia. The effects [of the programme] are obvious. We will now investigate into a nationwide extension the NFPP and strive for the protection of all natural forests [in China]. Currently, we are increasing financial spending, as maybe [the policy] will slightly decrease GDP, but in the long run, it will bring great benefits for the country." (Shi/He 2018)

The quote is reproduced in several reports and documents, and thus becomes a central aspect of the story. In his speech, Xi admits that the policy will inevitably bring about adverse economic effects on the forest sector and local economies. He refers to what later would be encapsulated in the term New Normal – an ideological concept which affirms that China's economy has entered a new phase of medium to high speed growth. At the same time, New Normal is also a request that local governments shift from quantitative to qualitative development, giving higher importance to environmental protection. 'Great benefits for the country' addresses both the environmental and the economic realm.

In the first place, the policy is promoted as a measure to protect China's natural resources and, as such, as the operationalisation of the ideological construct of Ecological Civilisation.

> "The [goal of the] overall ban on commercial logging in natural forests is the good protection of our country's precious natural forest resources. [The policy] advances the urgent need for the construction of an ecological civilization." (Zhao 2014)

Nevertheless, forest protection is not merely a measure for the sake of environmental protection. The policy also reflects a decision to safeguard a bioeconomic resource that provides the raw material for a series of industries (e.g., forestry, pulp and paper, construction, etc.) and a source of income for many people. Consequently, the official narrative also emphasises that the policy will help forests to recover, and once recovered, these industries will be less dependent on exports (Han 2014). As such, the policy becomes part of Xi Jinping's vision of a powerful and prosperous China which is captured in the construct of National Rejuvenation.

Undoubtedly, associating the logging ban with Xi Jinping in person and his central ideological concepts is a deliberate strategy to turn the policy into a signature policy of Xi Jinping that seeks to bolster his image as that of a visionary leader. Each intermediate goal that is achieved will automatically be converted into a success that can be directly attributed to Xi in person: namely, his personal contribution to the country's wellbeing and the CCP's problem-solving capacities under his leadership. Eventual drawbacks can be easily blamed on local government authorities (Ran 2017).

Ideological constructs – such as National Rejuvenation – form an "essential part of China's official language" (Davies 2014: 150), as they define the goals of the party and its leaders. They are part of the CCP's legitimation strategy and that of its rulers, hence also in the construction of official narratives. Davis explains further that new or refined constructs aim to demonstrate the current leaders' ability to respond to newly emerging challenges in socio-economic development; whereas, by retaining formulas of their predecessors, new leaders underscore the continuity of the CCP's one-party-rule (Davis 2014: 150).

Ecological Civilization had initially been introduced by Hu Jintao in 2007, but gained real political momentum at the 18th Party Congress. Hu placed the concept in a prominent place in his last speech, and so left his successor with the "unaccomplished task" (Marinelli 2018: 376) of resolving the issue of environmental pollution and natural resource degradation. By retaining, yet refining, the concept of Ecological Civilization, Xi has created an "imagined path-dependency" (Noesselt 2017: 345) on the ideas and quests of his predecessor and officially accepted this mission bestowed on him. The logging ban, among a series of other policies, is

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thought to help realise this mission. It is an operationalisation of Ecological Civilization and a contribution to Building a Beautiful China.

The pursuit of "imagined path-dependency" (Noesselt 2017: 345) is not confined to the ideological sphere but also applies to issue-based ideas that link incumbent leaders with their predecessors. Official documents and state media use the NFPP as the central point of reference – a policy that was introduced under the leadership of Jiang Zemin in 1998 and continued during Hu-Wen administration. By doing so, the narrative tells a story of the historical continuity of visionary state leaders who have been striving to achieve sustainability. The logging ban becomes historical evidence of how the party-state has *already* solved the fundamental question of how to substantially improve both economic and environmental outcomes; at the same time, it projects past achievements into the future.

> "The ecology must be protected; the economy must be developed. How to progress green development based on the good protection of the ecology and walk on a path where economic, social, and ecological interests complement each other, bring out the best in each other? Let's make a practical exploration of the NFPP and the road it has constructed for 20 years." (Shi et al. 2018)

Marinelli (2018: 368) sees a critical linguistic strategy of ideological concepts in their "projective temporality" or "future perfect tense"; official documents contain "recurring projections of perfection into an allegedly perfect future." The narrative of the logging ban adopts a similar linguistic strategy and projects the glorious outcomes of the policy in a not too distant future of 10-20 years. Publications rhapsodise about forests that will be rich in China's most precious tree species, clean water, and abundant biodiversity (Shi et al. 2018). They undergird this projection with images of lush forests that appear to be virtually pristine and untouched by any human activity. In this perfect future, people are happily living together in peace and harmony with nature; their livelihoods are prosperous, as nature provides them with the necessary resources to make a living (e.g., forest guards, owners of eco-hostels), and local industries flourish due to the sale of alternative (non-timber) high-quality products (Xie 2018; Ke 2018).

To make these projections more convincing, the success story of the logging ban is substantiated with 'facts' that, in theory, can be studied and

analysed. Here, the NFPP turns out to be a perfect showcase for symbolic legitimation. As the NFPP has been implemented for almost two decades, state authorities and renowned research institutions have collected vast amounts of scientific data on its outcomes. Building on the strategy of "doing things with numbers" (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2018), the official narrative is fed with data that describe changes on the aggregate level, including forest cover, biodiversity, and rural livelihoods (Shi et al. 2018). In other words, numbers become witnesses of the leadership's capacity to think and *act* in new directions. Needless to say, the reports spare all the pitfalls of measurement, as well as variations across regions and forest management regimes that are salient issues and extensively discussed in the academic literature.

Finally, the political communication of the logging ban features a series of methods that aim to increase the policy's visibility and signal political relevance. Since 2014, the policy has been mentioned in several high-level documents and speeches, *including Document No. 1* of 2015 (Zhongfa 2015), *Opinions on Advancing the Construction of Ecological Civilization* in 2015 (Zhongfa 2015), and in Xi Jinping's reports at the 19th Party Congress on 18 October 2017. In China, the number of times an issue or a person is mentioned in central documents and speeches serves as a yardstick against which observers and the public estimate the relevance or weight of a policy in the current agenda. Besides that, its occurrence in speeches and documents is also part of the story being told.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The article began by introducing the argument that the principles of the CCP's organizational ideology, as coined by Schurmann in 1968, continue to shape political decision-making and the way in which regime performance is conveyed to the public in contemporary China. Taking the recent ban on commercial logging in natural forests as a case study, I show that the policy epitomises the leadership's political endeavor to reconcile environmental and economic interests in development. The decision and the governance approach send symbolic messages of political will and capacity to translate values into action. Official propaganda turns the ban

into a signature policy of Xi Jinping, thus bolstering his image as a capable leader; at the same time, it also constructs a path-dependency of party-rule by creating a strong association with the NFPP. Twenty years of documented results open a window of opportunity, not only to project visions about the ban's future outcomes, but also to feed them with actual experiences and (selective) verifiable data. In doing so, the narrative helps to anticipate the accomplishment of sustainability.

Governance reform sends a strong symbolic message in much the same way as the political narrative has significant discursive power. However, the important question is whether perceived performance matches reality on the ground. Looking into the scholarly debate, it becomes evident that the way forest protection is carried out is highly contested. The outcomes of political efforts to reconcile the salient conflicts in forest management vary across regions and depend on institutional, social, and economic circumstances, as well as a host of factors that are outside the domain of policy (Cao 2008; Zhai et al. 2014; Ren et al. 2015; Xie et al. 2016). One of the major issues in forestry is the lack of technical know-how of local foresters and farmers (Xu 2011: 371). Although it is a known fact that those actors who "translate the words of policy statements […] into action" (Kaufman 2006: 4) lack the necessary technical expertise, China's forestry training system does not provide sufficient remedies (Marinaccio 2018, 2019). Another problem is that China's Forest Law was formulated when China was transitioning from a planned economy to marketisation; it has been amended only once since its initial enactment in 1985. For this reason, the law has a strong focus on the regulation of logging quotas (Zeng 2008) but does not sufficiently incorporate the idea of resource protection and fails to tackle issues of protection and damage control (Sun 2015).

Currently, the area of natural forests takes up 64 percent of national forestland (121.84 million ha), covering mainly provinces in China's Northeast and Southwest (NFGA 2018). Natural forests play a crucial role in biodiversity protection and are a repository for highly valued tree species that are not available for the time being in plantations in the Southeast and South (Sun et al. 2016: 4). Although experts have been lobbying for strengthened protection of China's natural forests under a policy framework that promotes natural recovery and the recreation of natural ecosys-

tems (Cao 2008; Xu 2011; Wang 2018), the recent ban is not regarded as an "optimum solution" (Yang 2017: 117).

During my last visit to Beijing in August 2019, I talked to several forestry experts, asking their opinions about the policy and its expected outcomes. Behind closed doors, they revealed strong critical stances towards the policy and expressed their doubts regarding the anticipated environmental benefits. If forests are not subjected to active management, challenges, such as aging forests (which increase the risk of forest fires), will emerge. An official from the National Administration of Forestry and Grassland objected that logging was not entirely banned, as thinning for forest management purposes was still allowed. However, many experts complained that logging quotas had already been too low to guarantee sustainable forest management before the ban was extended. Another problem they pointed out was that local governments would most probably shirk implementation, and the enforcement of the ban in collective forests would be even more complex, as farmers had to actively consent to ecological compensation schemes. Due to these issues, the policy would likely be changed in the coming years, so claimed one of my informants.

The above-outlined begs the following question: To which extent and under which conditions would bad performance attract the wider public's attention? Would implementation failure or environmental damage have any impact on the public perceptions of regime performance? Arguably, bad policy-making in forestry has not led to noteworthy contentious actions similar to those we have observed in the cases of air pollution. Yet, as outlined above, aging forests increase the risk of forest fires, which in turn jeopardise human lives and can lead to considerable property damage. Both the risk of forest fires and their occurrences have grown alarmingly over the past years. Once forest fires become an imminent threat, people might start put into question the respective political decisions. As Xi has made forests symbols of green development, clean environment, and improved livelihoods (Gao/Yan 2012), Chinese people might, sooner or later, take the government at its word with regard to forest management, to the same extent as they are now taking it at its word with respect to pollution control.

1   Renminbi is the official Chinese currency.

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Abstract *Aufbauend auf Schurmanns (1968) Konzept der „Organisationsideologie" zeigt der Artikel, dass politische Prozesse in China auch heute noch von der Notwendigkeit geprägt sind, eine wahrnehmbare Kohärenz zwischen offiziell propagierten Werten und politischen Handlungen zu schaffen. Diese Notwendigkeit prägt nicht nur politische Entscheidungsprozesse, sondern auch wie diese der Öffentlichkeit vermittelt werden. Mittels einer Fallstudie erörtert der Artikel das jüngst verhängte Abholzverbot in Naturwäldern (2014). Während die politische Maßnahme selbst die Bemühungen der chinesischen Regierung, Umwelt- und Wirtschaftsinteressen in Einklang zu bringen, versinnbildlichen soll, ist die Art und Weise ihrer Umsetzung eine symbolische Bekundung von politischem Willen und Staatskapazitäten. Die offizielle Narrative betont die entscheidende Rolle Xi Jinpings im jüngsten Entscheidungsprozess, gleichzeitig konstruiert sie rhetorisch die Pfadabhängigkeit der Einparteienherrschaft der KPCh. Sie projiziert eine positive Vision in die Zukunft, die sie mit (selektiven) empirischen Daten und individuellen Erfahrungen aus der Vergangenheit untermauert. Unter ExpertInnen ist das Abholzverbot umstritten und es birgt auch ein politisches Risiko.*

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